

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY & NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Views from the Global South

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Venezuela's Defence Diplomacy under Chávez and Maduro (1999-2018)

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Abstract

Between the 1950s and the late 1980s, Venezuela's economy and welfare attracted many migrants. An economic crisis, subsequent mass uprising and riots, and brutal repression by the armed forces was a watershed. Mid-career officers conspired; one of them, Hugo Chávez, a Lieutenant-Colonel staged a coup that failed (1992). Imprisoned and amnestied, he founded a political movement, won the presidential elections and took office in 1999.

Chávez and Castro became revolutionary brothers-in-arms. Venezuela supported Cuba by subsidised oil, Cuba provided military and intelligence experts, and medical and literacy personnel on a massive scale, around 50,000 in 2013. Chávez launched an extraordinary pro-poor reform programme, the 'socialism of the twentieth century'. Meanwhile, he strengthened the armed forces both numerically and budgetarily, buying Russian and Chinese equipment. He also created militias of armed civilians up to 365,000 members.

Gradually the military occupied more strategic positions as cabinet ministers or supervisors of state institutions. Chávez death in 2013 coincided with the fall of the oil prices, dramatic budget cuts, mass demonstrations, and mass outmigration, in the context of a galloping inflation and a polarised society. His successor Maduro governs by decree (there are two contending parliaments) and turned nearly all significant cabinet and top administrative positions in the public sector and the nationalised economy to the military, his staunch allies.

Introduction: Venezuela's natural resources under previous governments

Venezuela has the second largest oil deposits in the world, owns huge gas reserves, and has the second largest hydropower facilities in Latin America. For almost the entire twentieth century, Venezuela was blessed with abundant natural resources that enriched the national elite and a growing middle-class population. Oil was discovered in the 1920s, and in the first three decades after World War II, the booming oil prices made Venezuela a wealthy country. From the 1950s to the early 1980s, Venezuela's economy experienced consistent growth, and the country enjoyed one of highest standards of living in Latin America, attracting many migrants. Particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, oil revenues

guaranteed generous public spending on welfare programmes, health care and education, and food and transport subsidies. Venezuela was also one of the founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In 1976, the oil industry was nationalised and by 1980 the new conglomerate, *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.* (PDVSA), was the third largest oil company in the world after the purchase of refineries in the United States (US) and Europe.

From the late 1950s onwards, Venezuela had a bipartisan political system, the result, after a period of dictatorship, of a pact between two parties: *Acción Democrática* (AD), a social democratic party with a strong labour base; and the *Comité de Organización Electoral Independiente* (COPEI), a centre-right Christian Democratic party. For 40 years, they largely alternated office, but in the late 1980s this political structure deteriorated, as a result of internal leadership disputes and widespread corruption amongst public officials (Levine, 2002). The political decline was accompanied by a collapse of world oil prices, a process of devaluation and double-digit inflation (84% in 1989 and 99% in 1996).

An IMF-assisted adjustment programme, launched by government technocrats as shock therapy for the economy, prompted mass uprising and riots in the country's capital Caracas, which were repressed by the armed forces (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018:5). This so-called 'Caracazo', with a death toll of at least 500 citizens, was a watershed event.

The advent of Chávez

Venezuelan mid-career officers, members of a group called COMACATE (in English: Comandantes [Lieutenant-Colonels], Mayors, Captains and Lieutenants) began to conspire against the government and planned a reformist coup. There were also other parallel military opposition groups, one of which was headed by Hugo Chávez, then a Lieutenant-Colonel who, along with his brothers-in-arms, formed a clandestine movement (MBR-200) and staged a failed coup in 1992. He received only a light prison sentence and he retained a considerable popularity as someone who had stood up to government corruption. After his release, he founded another political movement with a programme of social reforms and presented himself as a presidential candidate.

After his release from jail, he was discreetly monitored by Cuban diplomats. When he launched his new movement and campaigned in the slums and rural villages, they were impressed by the adoration he attracted, and when they heard religious villagers saying, "The Messiah has come, I want to touch the Messiah", they were convinced that Chávez would be the next Venezuelan president. His campaign for social and economic reforms won him the favour of both the rural poor and urban slum dwellers, the working class and the impoverished middle classes. When he wanted to visit Cuba, he was told that

"Cuba not even could buy him a matchbox" and he bought his own ticket. When the plane landed, Fidel Castro greeted him as if he already were a Chief of State. It was the beginning of a special bond: Fidel the wise old mentor, Chávez his young revolutionary successor and colleague.

Chávez was not the first revolutionary Venezuelan military president. In 1958, after the overthrow of Venezuelan dictator Pérez Jimenez and before the bipartisan pact between AD and COPEI, leftist Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal became interim president. He sent a large stock of weapons to Castro's Rebel Army in December 1958, when they were at the brink of victory. Similarly, Chávez was a life-long devotee of Simon Bolívar and admirer of leftist military reformists Velasco (in Peru, 1968-1975) and Torrijos (in Panama, 1968-1981), and he built on their legacy. Bolívar, Velasco, and Torrijos believed in the ideal of an indivisible unity between people and the army, and identified themselves as military reformers with a special calling to break the power of the economic and political oligarchy, restore national control over the economy, and carry out social reforms, implemented by the Armed Forces. Their public discourses and they are basically identical: soldiers of poor descent, familiar with poverty, educated within the army which let them grow beyond their expectations, extremely loyal to the armed institution, and acting as structural reformers for the benefit of the poor and underprivileged. However, Chávez was the most outspoken and emphasised the role of the military as the vanguard of his future revolutionary process. In his own words: 'We can say that it is like the formula of water: H_2O . If we say that the people are the oxygen, the armed force is the hydrogen. Water doesn't exist without hydrogen' (Bilbao, 2002:28-29). The new president decided to trust his loyal brothers-in-arms and other military senior officers.

He campaigned as a presidential candidate against the two existing but disintegrating political parties (Carnevali, 2014), and won the elections in 1998. In 1999, he organised a Constituent Assembly where he obtained a large majority. He later won three consecutive presidential elections: in 2000 (with 60%), 2006 (with 63%) and 2012 (with 55%).

Like Simon Bolívar, the national and Latin American hero of the War of Independence, Chávez envisioned a 'civil-military alliance'. Before Chávez's presidency, the Venezuelan military was constitutionally restricted to safeguarding public security and protecting the national territory. They could not vote in elections and were not expected to participate in public debates. The new Chávez Constitution drastically changed the role of the armed forces, turning it into an instrument of national development and a service provider to the poor and underprivileged. His initial political movement, and later the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*, PSUV), was built on the sympathy and the loyal votes of the poor classes of society; by the time he took in office in 1999, approximately half the population lived below the poverty line (ECLAC, 2001:44).

He also received support from grassroots organisations that emerged during his presidency, and more than 30,000 ‘communal councils’ (*consejos comunales* in Spanish), elected by the community to initiate and oversee local activities and policies.

However, there was also growing opposition from military elites, and segments of the middle- and upper-classes. In 2002, Chávez survived an attempted military coup, and a failed general strike, organised by a heterogeneous alliance of military and opposition party leaders, which left the already-divided political opposition discredited. As a result, Chávez purged the higher military echelons, and loyalty to the president and the ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ became a career requirement.

The Venezuelan armed forces under Chávez

The Venezuelan Armed Forces have four branches: the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the National Guard (a kind of militarised police). These were renamed the “National Bolivarian Armed Force” (FANB, *Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana* in Spanish). Gradually, the FANB became the executive instrument of the charismatic President-Comandante, who had organised his sympathisers into a political party, militias, trade unions, and neighbourhood associations. The higher echelons of the military and the mid-ranking officers became part of the transformed army, used as a state-building institution and the right arm of the president. The nationalist-leftist ideology of the ‘military as guardians of the nation’, acting for the benefit of the entire nation, especially the poor, contributed to their institutional status. Since the beginning of the Chávez’s presidency, the armed forces had been used for civil tasks, and this role was later expanded, such as in the management of gigantic housing projects and other infrastructural provisions.

The appointment of the military to management positions in these projects, the administration, and the nationalised economy helped to increase their loyalty to the president, who styled himself as following in the footsteps of Bolívar. It also helped that military salaries were increased, and that lower-class popular access to the military and militias was encouraged. After the removal of adversaries within the armed forces after the failed coup of 2002, Chávez rapidly promoted loyal non-commissioned officers to officers and mid-career officers to top jobs, and members of the armed forces were permitted to vote in elections.

Between 2008 and 2015, the armed force’s budget grew from 1.06% to 4.61% of the GDP, while military personnel increased from 117,400 in 2010 to 197,744 in 2014 (from 40 to 63 per 10,000 citizens). In 2015, the number of militias was 365,046, organised in 100 ‘integral defence areas’ (RESDAL, 2016:210-215; Jácome, 2018). Chávez named these popular auxiliary forces the ‘People-in-Arms’ (*Pueblo en Armas*) to emphasise the bond between the armed forces and the civilian population.

Venezuela's sources of weaponry changed over time. At first, Chávez tried to match the much-larger armed forces of Colombia (around 400,000 effectives due to its 'internal armed conflict') by buying sophisticated Russian equipment especially for the Venezuelan air force and navy. In later years, that was complemented by Chinese multipurpose airplanes. He also tried to acquire Brazilian and Spanish aircraft and French submarines, but US pressure prevented the delivery (IISS, 2009:57-58). In 2005, Chávez also signed a contract with Russia for the assembly of Kalashnikov assault rifles, ammunition and drones for popular defence purposes, in the case of a US invasion. As long as world oil prices were high, the Venezuelan government heavily invested in weaponry.

Socialism of the 21st century, Cuba and petro-diplomacy

In the first ten years of Chávez's presidency, he expanded on his notion of 'socialism of the 21st century'. World oil prices were booming, and the oil revenues were the basis for an extensive redistribution programme. Chávez's socialism consisted of extensive nationalisation and expropriation, more than 20 major social and economic reforms, new political structures, the incorporation of the army as an executive body, and a charismatic *President-Comandante*. He launched a large series of domestic social and economic 'missions', headed by trusted military personnel and civilians, in the process creating a system of presidential ministers and cabinet members who depended directly on the president's orders.

Research NGO *Transparencia Venezuela* worked out that, of all 526 Venezuelan state-owned enterprises, 74% were nationalised or expropriated under presidents Chávez and Maduro. Oil giant PDVSA, nationalised in 1975 and extended to a conglomerate of interlinked corporations, became the financial draft horse of the reforms, while the nationalisation of banks facilitated financial control by the government. In 2003, a policy was issued on foreign exchange and on consumer prices in the hands of the state (*Transparencia Venezuela*, 2017:3-4, 12, 32).

After 2002, Castro provided Chávez with Cuban bodyguards, as in the case of Allende in the early 1970s. Chávez also began to arm civilian militias as had been done in Cuba, where militias had been created immediately before the Bay of Pigs invasion in order to prevent domestic difficulties or counter an invasion by foreign mercenaries or soldiers. In later years, the Cuban and Venezuelan security apparatus reached an agreement of mutual cooperation, enabling operations in one another's territory.

Chávez and Castro built a relationship as two equal partners with Venezuela as financier, which became a mutually beneficial agreement: Cuban doctors, literacy trainers and educational experts went to Venezuela, while Cuba received generous oil deliveries at preferential rates. In 2013, the year of Chávez's death, around 50,000 Cuban teachers,

literacy experts, university professors, doctors, dentists, paramedical personnel and other experts were employed in Venezuela. Chávez also became the financier of a network of like-minded Latin American countries, the ALBA countries (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America): with Bolivia (2006), Nicaragua (2007), Ecuador (2009) and six Caribbean island-states, with Surinam and Haiti receiving observer status. Honduras's affiliation in 2009 was prevented by a military coup.

The Cuban and Venezuelan leaders considered a kind of further political unification, with Cuba's Vice-President of the Council of State in 2005 claiming that, "there was only one country with two presidents". In 2007, Chávez launched the idea of a Cuban-Venezuelan confederation: 'In the near future we, Cuba and Venezuela, could perfectly establish a confederation of republics: one confederation, two republics in one, two countries in one.'¹ However, Venezuela and Cuba had two decidedly different economies and political structures, and Venezuela's was already strongly polarised. As a result, the project was never realised.

The Cuban-Venezuelan health programme and the many other missions initiated in those first years were a great success, giving Chávez huge popularity. Undeniably, the quality of life for the poorer people of Venezuela greatly improved during the first ten years of his presidency (ECLAC, 2017:47, 50). According to the Venezuelan Institute of statistics (INE), the poverty percentage decreased from 44% in 1999 to 27% in 2010.

Chávez's foreign policy was aimed at a Latin American integration policy that was not dominated by the US. He was one of the main architects of a new hemispheric integration model, with the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) in 2004, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) in 2008, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (*Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños*, CELAC) in 2012. These organisations were created to bypass US and OAS political and military influence, and to exclude those Caribbean islands with US or European statehood. Most of the ideological underpinning was a fervent pro-poor, pro-socialist and 'Our America' discourse, accompanied by vitriolic anti-US rhetoric.

There is good reason to use the term 'petro-diplomacy' (coined by Clem & Maingot, 2011) when discussing Venezuelan foreign policy. Financial support was given from Venezuelan oil revenues or on the basis of highly favourable oil-supply programmes, like PetroCaribe, PetroSur, PetroNica and PetroAndina. Chávez was an important contributor to institutions like the Forum of São Paulo, founded in 1990 by Lula and Castro, that comprises more than 100 organisations and movements, and he also co-financed the World Social Forum, a Brazilian initiative created in 2001. In 2003, Castro and Chávez initiated the Network of Intellectuals and Artists in Defence of Humanity, presided over by Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova.

However, with respect to Chávez's domestic policy, while poverty and income inequality declined, urban crime grew. Between 1999 and 2010, the number of murders per 100.000 inhabitants increased from 25 to 57, and this is at least partly due to radical changes in the institutional order. The new government encouraged land invasions, the establishment of a new social order destabilised the existing institutions of law and order: a new criminal legislation curtailed the role of the police, there were public conflicts between the president and the armed forces during the failed coup in 2002, conflicts with the old political structures, and half-hearted government action against armed gangs in communities (Briceño-León & Camardiel, 2015).

Along with this, political opposition proliferated. A divided segment of the two former political powers (AD and COPEI), as well as 18 smaller opposition parties of all political orientations, formed the Democratic Unity Roundtable (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, MUD) in 2009. In June 2009, former social democratic politician Antonio Ledezma was elected as Mayor of Caracas and re-elected in 2013. The onset of an economic recession, double-digit inflation, increasing levels of poverty and insecurity, and reports of corruption affected Chávez's popularity in his last years, but did not stop him from winning an electoral victory just before his death. However, under the presidency of his successor Maduro, the problems multiplied exponentially.

Maduro's Venezuela (2013-2018)

Nicolás Maduro, son of a prominent union leader and later a union leader himself, followed cadre courses in Cuba and was a loyal 'Chavista'. He made a career under Chávez as President of the National Assembly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vice President and, after Chávez's death, as Interim President. He won the presidency in 2013 with a narrow majority, and was soon confronted by a deep economic malaise, conflicting power blocs within the governing PSUV, and growing popularity of his political opponents.

In the last quarter of 2013, Venezuela's economy entered a recession, and in 2014, world oil prices fell dramatically. The government's course of action was monetary financing. Venezuela became heavily indebted to Russia and China, and the 'parallel dollar' (the price setting of nearly all consumer goods) went up explosively. Analysts can only use estimates because the Central Bank has not published inflation statistics since 2015, but most foreign analysts describe the Venezuelan economy at present (May 2019) as in free-fall or meltdown with an inflation rate of 815,194 percent. The circulation of cash is restricted, and there is an acute shortness of essential goods and services, particularly medicine and food.

The social and political divide in Venezuela, already visible during Chávez's last years, became catastrophic under Maduro's presidency, resulting in opposition marches and

wide-spread discontent. However, the opposition MUD is also internally divided. The most government-friendly sector wants clean elections and the release of political prisoners, others would welcome a coup by the armed forces, while the most radical wing would opt for an invasion by the US.

When the crisis started to impact the daily budget and national diet, Maduro's government organised a new clientelist instrument, *Comités Locales De Abastecimiento y Producción* (CLAP), local production and distribution committees who provide a three-weekly food package per household. It is a national programme that sustains the core of the Maduro vote. In 2014, only 8% of Venezuelans received a package, but this had jumped to 28% by 2016, while structural poverty escalated to 38% in 2016 (ENCOVI, 2017). It is generally agreed that by August 2018, poverty had reached the same percentage (around 50%) as when Chávez took office. The 'Carnet de la Patria' (Certificate of the Fatherland) and CLAP are the new political loyalty programmes of the government, and the food packages are distributed by the military or the local party representatives (López Maya, 2018:69).

Since 2014, the number of Venezuelan migrants seeking refuge in Latin America, the US and Spain has grown (Freier, 2018), although the exact amounts are hard to ascertain. According to UNHCR and OIM data, 328,888 official asylum-seekers and other legal migrants had left Venezuela by 31 August 2014, the asylum-seekers predominantly to Peru, the US, Brazil and Spain, the other legal migrants principally to Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Argentina. However, that is only the tip of the iceberg, and Venezuelan scholars estimate that the exodus already numbers between three and three and a half million Venezuelans, predominantly economic migrants (May 2019). The first wave was the academic brain-drain: engineers, doctors, architects, and other professionals. After this, mass migration increased.

Corruption and crime also increased, particularly in Caracas, the larger cities and the long border region with Colombia, where violent non-state actors operate, such as former guerrilla units, drug gangs and armed criminals. It is widely-known that of the 50 most lethal cities of 300,000 inhabitants or more in the world in 2016, 42 are located in Latin America, and Caracas is the most violent city of all, with 130 assassinations per 100,000 inhabitants (Seguridad, Justicia y Paz, 2017).

Researchers have noted the nebulous or non-existent government publications about crime and crime statistics and, in 2015 and 2016, two renowned scholars published on the structural character of corruption in the country, drawing attention to the large Colombian and Venezuelan criminal and drug networks (Tablante & Tarre 2015; 2016). Journalists and academic researchers can only speculate about the extent of illegal import and export of drugs and valuables, gold and capital, but there are strong indications that

Rampa 4, the government airfield, is a site from which gold, monetary instruments and stockpiles of cash are transferred to accounts at foreign banks in Europe and Panama, or as deposits for residences and other properties in foreign countries (Briceño Torrealba, 2016). The researchers also highlighted substantial corruption within the oil giant, PDVSA, and other state-owned enterprises, such as production and distribution consortium, Pdval (Tablante & Tarre, 2016:104ff., 168ff.).

In information about the 526 state-owned or nationalised companies, only 21% of the shareholder structure, 6% of the names of the board members, and 24% of the names of the CEOs have been published, and of the identified CEOs, 30% are active duty or retired military (Transparencia Venezuela, 2017:8). The military oversee and administer CLAP, and also manage the entire electrical and hydro-power sector, the Metro of Caracas, and the Corporación Venezolana de Guyana, the source of nearly all national natural and mineral resources. Additionally, they operate the entrepreneurial industrial complex associated with the Ministry of Defence (Ramos Pismarato, 2018:271ff.).

Along with this, Maduro governs by decree, supported unconditionally by the upper echelons of the armed forces. In early 2015, the Mayor of Caracas, Ledezma, was detained on charges of supporting an attempted coup, then put under house arrest, confined again, and again put under house arrest. In November 2017, he fled to Spain where he received political asylum. In December 2015, the united opposition MUD won the parliamentary elections with 56% of the vote, and in response, Maduro by decree organised the election of a Constituent Assembly in June 2017. The MUD parties boycotted the elections and the governing PSUV won a massive victory in the absence of rivals. At present, the Constituent Assembly 'cohabits' with the elected parliament but has assumed all legislative functions.

In two subsequent elections, for the governors of the federal states in October 2017 and the mayors of the municipalities in December 2017, the PSUV again achieved victories. The MUD was divided on participation, and Maduro won 19 of the 23 seats, and surprisingly obtained a (disputed) majority in states where even Chávez was defeated at the height of his popularity, although the opposition considers these elections as flawed. In the municipal elections of December 2017, only some of the MUD parties presented candidates. With a turnout of only 47% of the electorate, Maduro won 300 of the 335 municipalities, even in the principal districts of Caracas, recently seen as an opposition city. In May 2018, with a turnout of 46%, and with the MUD parties again boycotting, Maduro won the presidential elections with 68% of the votes, his closest challenger oppositional 'Chavista' candidate Falcón, who won 21%. In January 2019, Juan Gaidó, president of the parliament, declared himself interim president disputing the legitimacy of both Maduro's presidency and the Constituent Assembly. The country has again two presidents in one country, but not exactly what Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez had intended.

The Venezuelan armed forces under Maduro

After Maduro's inauguration, civilian ministries and management functions were increasingly transferred to the military. Active or retired military officers occupied key cabinet positions; and important sectors and strategic public instruments, like tax collection, budgeting, public contracts and tendering, purchases and acquisitions in the public sector, public imports, and control of the public banks are also managed by military officers (Tablante & Tarre, 2015; Ramos Pismarato, 2018).

Under Chávez, the FANB were already a powerful instrument, acting as both the right (defence and internal security) and left hand (in charge of ministries, missions and economic management) of the president. However, Chávez's charisma was undisputed and he maintained control by annual appointments of new senior commanders, resulting in career mobility of more junior officers.² He also rewarded loyalty with promotion, thus creating a system of rank inflation within the armed forces. Some recently retired high-ranking senior commanding officers estimate the number of generals (and their equivalents in the navy, air force and national guard) at 700.³

At present, the armed forces still act as both the defence and management, and control and repression forces of the ruling government. Maduro also developed a new mass promotion programme to reward loyalty. On 5 July 2018, the Independence Day of Venezuela, Maduro promoted 183 officers to general or admiral (*El País*, 2018), and topped up the salaries of the officers' corps, so that in terms of national salary scales in the public sector, an army colonel earns 15 times more than a university professor. During the 20th century, Venezuelan ministers of defence could be either a civilian or a high-ranking military officer, but under Chávez, 12 loyal senior military officers were appointed first as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and subsequently as minister of defence.

Maduro extended this system of selecting only fierce 'Chavista' military loyalists, such as General Vladimir Padrino, who was commander-in-chief in 2013, and was made minister of defence in 2014. Confronted with political mayhem and economic calamity, Maduro issued an 'emergency economic decree' in July 2016, creating a 'sovereign and safe supply' of food and goods, to be headed by his minister of defence. Padrino appointed 24 flag officers as section heads: for rice, fruits, chickens, beans, etc., and because food provision is politically vital in present-day Venezuela, the military effectively controls the government and the ministers. Large-scale corruption within the armed forces is a common research topic in the academic and journalistic fields, and according to information published in *El País* (2018), in the first half of 2018 the Ministry of Defence received 35% more budget than the Ministry of Education, and 17 times more than the Ministry of Agriculture.

General Padrino is now in charge of national defence and management of the national economy, at the same time overseeing all other social missions, acting as a kind of super-

premier, and the armed forces oversee 51% of the entire national budget (Transparencia Venezuela, 2017:7; Jácome, 2018). In November 2017, Maduro appointed the commander of the National Guard, General Manuel Quevedo (another loyal 'Chavista'), as both the Oil Minister and as president of the PDVSA, the state-owned industrial complex of oil enterprises on which the Venezuelan economy is so dependent. Consequently, senior military members are strongly intertwined with government. In the present (September 2018) 32-member cabinet, 12 members are military, controlling the most vital positions: Defence, Interior, Justice, Alimentation, Housing, Public Works, Transport, and Electricity.

The close collaboration between Cuba and Venezuela in terms of intelligence and state security has been consolidated (Trinkunas, 2005; Ramos Pismarato, 2008; Ramos Pismarato, Francesca & Andrés Otálvaro, 2008; Jácome, 2011; Sánchez Medero, 2014; Strønen, 2016; Giacalone, 2017). Cuban assistance and training have strongly influenced the military defence strategy, as well as the ideology of high-ranking officers of the armed forces, and the intelligence and counterintelligence services in their efforts to 'control external and internal threats' (Jácome, 2017). Civilian, military and political intelligence tend to overlap, and the distinction between the functions and operations of the Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional (National Intelligence Service, SEBIN), the Dirección General de Inteligencia Militar (Military Intelligence, DGIM) and the Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar (Military Counterintelligence, DGCIM) is unclear in practice (Ramos Pismarato, 2018:268).

Conclusions

On 3 May 2018, President Maduro published a page-long article in *El País*, arguing that Venezuela's democracy is quite different from all others, 'Because all others – in practically all other countries of the world – are democracies created by and for the elites ... class based democracies ... For us, the essence of our democracy is that the economy serves the people and not [that] the people are at the service of the economy ... For us ... the economy is justice and democracy, protection.'

The declaration is hopeful, but less encouraging is the phenomenon of growing autocracy, and militarisation of the economy, society and political structures. Less hopeful, too, is the hyperinflation and mass emigration, not only by the elites and upper-middle classes, but by poor people arriving at refugee camps and bivouacs in other Latin American countries at the mercy of perhaps distant family members or former Venezuelan refugees, other people with compassion, or foreign governments overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the continuing migration stream.

Venezuela's democracy is based on an alliance between the elites of a political party and the military establishment, supported by a core of roughly 30% of the electorate.

However, in general, military institutions have a better life-expectancy than political parties, political careers and political leaders. At present (September 2018), the political fate of the president is largely dependent on the loyalty of his military supporters, while Venezuela is a house divided, economically and politically. The military sustains the president and oversees a large part of governing the country and managing the economy. But what if the Venezuelan economic and political crisis grows deeper, the protest movements become more desperate, and the armed forces, instead of loyal supporters, feel the need to become the national arbiter?

With two conflicting parliaments, a serious national division, an economy in hyperinflation, a failed refinancing of foreign debt, and rapid impoverishment of a considerable part of the population, the future of the country is depressing. In the near future, Venezuela's stormy years may turn into a hurricane.

Notes

- 1 Carlos Lage quoted in Pérez Marcano and Sánchez García (2007:176) and Hugo Chávez quoted in Martínez Heredia (2010:79).
- 2 Traditionally, the general commanders of the four branches have the highest seniority. If a more junior commander is appointed, all higher-ranking officers are invited to retirement.
- 3 Author's interviews in November 2017 in Caracas.

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